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ABSTRACT

This document is one of a series of student workbooks developed for workplace skill development courses or workshops by Mercer County Community College (New Jersey) and its partners. Designed to help employees empathize with others' points of view, the course is intended to teach employees to listen effectively, ask the right questions, and give and receive constructive feedback. The materials include the following information sheets: handling problems and conflicts (rating sheet), benefits of effective listening, active listening, active listening worksheet, developing good listening habits, effective listening techniques, using effective listening techniques, ten commandments for good listening, handling questions, and feedback (introduction, questionnaire, principles, do's and don'ts, and action plan for giving and getting feedback). (KC)

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THE ART OF ACTIVE LISTENING

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OVERVIEW OF WORKPLACE LITERACY PROJECT
Skills for Tomorrow, NOW

The Workplace Literacy Project resulted from a Department of Education grant, plus in-kind contributions from a partnership with General Motors Inland Fisher Guide Plant, Princeton Plasma Physics Laboratory, and St. Francis Medical Center. The project is an attempt to find solutions to the growing "skills gap" in industry today. More than 25 million Americans cannot read the front page of a newspaper. In addition, workers whose average ages are rising, must produce in a technological environment that may not have existed when they began working. This lack of knowledge makes it difficult to compete in a technologically changing workplace. Moreover, an increasing number of immigrants have entered the workforce with limited English communication skills. In response to this growing need, the Federal government provided a grant to Mercer County Community College and its partners to develop ways to enrich and expand employees' basic workplace knowledge. The aim of the project was also to improve the self-esteem of the participants.

Support for the project was solicited from all levels of company management and the unions. In addition, an advisory council, comprising key management and employees from each company determined the design, goals, and time-frame of the project. Each company provided a liaison person from their site, and MCCC hired a director to manage the program. Employee release time for classes was site-specific.

Participation in the program was voluntary. Information about classes was disseminated through company letters, flyers, union notices, notices included with paychecks, and open forums with supervisors and employees.

The ABLE test was used for normative pre and post testing. Other types of evaluations varied from course to course. MCCC counselors met with each student to discuss present and future educational objectives.

Courses were offered in reading, business writing, math, science, and English as a Second Language. In addition, there were workshops in problem solving, stress management, and other work survival skills. The curricula for the courses were customized for each worksite to be as job focused as possible.

It is our hope that this program will serve as a model for other organizations to empower their employees with the skills needed to succeed in the changing technological workplace, today and in the future.

THE ART OF ACTIVE LISTENING

The concept of active listening comes from the work of Carl Rogers, a psychologist, in On Becoming a Person (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1961). Active listening is the ability to empathize. An attitude of empathy allows you to be aware of the other person's feelings from his or her point of view.

Upon completion of this course, you should be able to:

- Listen effectively
- Ask the "right" questions
- Give and receive constructive feedback

HAGAR THE HORRIBLE

ARE YOU A GOOD LISTENER?

5	4	3	2	1
Always	Usually	Sometimes	Seldom	Never

1._____I allow the speaker to complete their own thoughts and sentences.

2._____I make sure I've understood the other person's point of view before I answer.

3._____I listen primarily for the facts.

4._____I appear to be calm, relaxed, composed and receptive.

5._____I listen even if the speaker or the subject is uninteresting.

6._____I don't interrupt even if I hear a statement I feel is wrong.

7._____I selectively listen, filtering out those messages that are not important to me or the situation.

8._____I listen to the total message rather than letting my thoughts drift to what I will say next.

9._____I send verbal clues to indicate I'm listening such as "yes" and "I see."

10._____I am not aroused to anger by emotional words.

SOME BENEFITS OF EFFECTIVE LISTENING

One definition of effective listening is "listening with understanding." This is the opposite of passive hearing, in which we are just quiet. Effective listening does require considerable quietness on our part to allow the other person to give us information, but we should ask some questions and give some feedback to make sure that we have a good grasp of what the other person is trying to tell us.

Effective listening means that the listener actively shares responsibility with the speaker for being sure that they reach an understanding of one another. This is an important skill which helps us do our jobs better.

The whole point of doing a good job of listening is to do a more effective job of communicating.

Some benefits of effective listening:

- We can learn important information that will help us do our jobs better.
- We can develop opinions on ideas and situations based on the new information others give us.
- We can respond more accurately to the ideas and opinions of others and therefore make a better contribution in conversations and meetings.
- We can involve other people in our planning and problem solving. They influence our thinking and are given an opportunity to contribute.
- We can develop awareness of how others see things.
- We can develop a basis for raising questions which we may need to ask about things that are important to us.
- We can pinpoint areas which we might need to explore by discovering gaps in the information of others.
- We can be alerted to potential problems.

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ACTIVE LISTENING

A complete active listening response has <u>two</u> parts.

The first part reflects the emotion: "I can understand your concern..."

The second part restates the situation "...that you were not notified about the change."

Examples of the first part might be:

I'm glad you're letting me know...

I understand your concern...

It is no wonder that you'd be concerned when...

I can see why it's important...

I'm sorry you've had trouble...

It is difficult when...

It can be annoying when...

It certainly is a concern...

It is frustrating when...

ACTIVE LISTENING WORKSHEET

For each of the following statements, write a response which acknowledges the emotion, then restates the situation.

1. Why can't you locate her? I need approval on this voucher before I can get reimbursed.

2. I don't understand this memo from your office. What am I supposed to do with this? There's a close deadline and I can't begin to cut through this confusion!

3. Put Pete Marwick on the line. It's important that I speak to him. I can't keep waiting for him to call me back.

4. If you can't help me, give me your supervisor right away.

5. I'm irritated that no one has been able to help me. My request is a simple one. Why can't you people accommodate even basic requests?

6. What's your problem there? Why is it taking your department so long to submit your paperwork? Everything is being held up!

To be an effective communicator, the manager must first learn the art of listening. Listening at the right time is as important as talking at the right time. Practicing the art of listening will improve your performance in business, industry, education, or in community and social relations. Listening pays big dividends in information, understanding, and performance. Therefore, it is helpful to develop some good listening habits. Business and professional people interested in improving their own performance can use the following guides to effective listening.

Share With the Speaker the Responsibility for Communication. Learning is primarily a listening--not a speaking--activity. Effective listeners assume their half of the responsibility for communication. Poor listeners usually fake attention to the speaker, yet hold the speaker responsible for not maintaining their interest. Pay attention to the speaker. Your failure to concentrate could prevent someone from getting through to you on a critical point or at a crucial time.

Be aware of your own motives for listening. Evaluate the speaker's subject in terms of your own future welfare. Ask yourself:

- Why am I listening to this person?
- What is this person's reason for speaking to me?
- What importance does this person's message have for me?

Exercise Emotional Control During Listening. Erase your prejudices, or at least try to put them aside for the time being. Don't let the speaker's appearance, mannerisms, voice or accent, race, age, or job level come between you and your opportunity to listen. You might miss something of importance from a new or different source. Withhold condemnation of the speaker or the thesis until you fully comprehend what he or she is saying. Don't permit an immediate dislike for a speaker or his or her ideas to disrupt your assimilation.

Watch for emotion-charged words that cause you to put up defenses. The speaker's language can cause an emotional reaction. Try to identify and to rationalize the words or phrases that upset you emotionally.

Focus on the information that the speaker is trying to convey, in spite of the word that he or she might choose to convey it. You will learn another's point of view, even if you don't agree with it.

Try to postpone personal worries that will lower your listening comprehension. You came to hear a speaker, or you made yourself accessible to people who want to talk to you. This is not the time to worry about personal problems.

Take It Easy. Don't interrupt or cut the talker off. If you are too eager to rebut, or think you are so smart that you don't have to listen, you may miss some important information. You might also misunderstand the whole point of what the speaker is trying to say. When you are thinking about what you're going to say next, you are not listening effectively. Then, communication stops.

Avoid overstimulation. This is the desire of the listener to enter immediately into the argument or presentation, either vocally or mentally. The overstimulated listener gets too excited, or excited too soon, by the speaker. Occasionally, we are roused in support of the speaker's point until we are certain we thoroughly understand it. Otherwise, our mind will go off on a tangent, and we will miss much of what is being said.

Arrange Favorable Physical Conditions For Listening. In a business setting, we don't always have full control of what happens when we try to listen to someone else, but we should make every effort to avoid distractions or barriers to communication.

Try to deal with interruptions such as a ringing telephone, people knocking on a closed door, or people pulling you aside to talk or ask questions.

Be aware of how you relate to people physically. Get on the same level (not standing over) as the person speaking to you. Move to the same general location, rather than sitting behind a desk.

If there is noise or discomfort in or outside of a meeting room, move quickly to abolish it. Close the door, ask non-participants to please carry on their conversations elsewhere, adjust the temperature, or do whatever is needed to help listeners concentrate. Take the necessary steps to keep barriers from arising before or as soon as a communication starts.

Take Time To Listen. Try not to say "I'm too busy to listen." Don't pass your listening responsibilities and opportunities on to others. Do your own listening, even if it takes time. Consider it a compliment that the person came to you. The more authority and responsibility a person has, the more listening he or she has to do.

Let Angry, Impassioned People Talk Themselves Out. Chances are, they will reason themselves into a sound position if you give them time.

Signal Your Attention To the Talker. You can repeat words and phrases from his or her conversation from time to time. Encourage the speaker with responses such as: "Yes, I understand," or "I'm glad you told me that," or a plain "Uh huh." You can nod in agreement or gesture with your hands. You can also let certain pauses pass without interruption, thus inviting your talker to go on.

Let Worried People Talk Themselves Out. Sometimes worried people just need someone to listen without giving any advice, passing judgment, or interrupting. This way, they can work things out themselves. What they need is your attention.

Steer the Talk in Helpful Directions. If your talker begins to digress, or simply complain, try to focus on the subject that is causing the problem.

Leave Decision Making Alone. As a listener, you are playing the role of guide and helper--not decider. It is your task to bring the problem into the open and to try to throw new light on it. The speaker must eventually find the answer, make the decision, or come to the conclusion.

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Business and professional people interested in improving their own performances can use these guides to improved listening.

- Develop an interest in what is being said. Ask yourself: "What is being said that I can use?"
- Give speaker your conscious attention. Establish eye contact and maintain it.
- Accept the challenge of understanding difficult, technical, or unfamiliar material. Find out what the speaker knows.
- Early over-involvement in the content or point of view causes us to become preoccupied with our own reactions or responses.
- Fight distraction. If bad listening conditions cannot be corrected, adjust quickly by concentrating.
- Take brief notes on the most salient points. Jot down questions on material you want to clarify or challenge later.
- Watch for "psychological deaf spots." These are the dwelling places of our beliefs, values, and convictions.
- Keep an open mind. Don't let your emotional reactions to the speaker's words turn you off to what is being said.
- Weigh the speaker's evidence by mentally questioning it.
  - Is this fact or opinion?
  - Is this evidence or argument?
  - Is the source unprejudiced?
  - Am I getting the full picture?
- Listen between the lines. Watch for:
  - Changing tone or volume of the speaker's voice.
  - Facial expressions.
  - Gestures and emphasis.
- Focus on central ideas. Mentally summarize what the speaker has been saying. What points have been made--if any?

1. An important concern for managers is receiving messages from the people who report to them.

2. An inadequate flow of messages from the bottom to the top generates misunderstanding and anxiety.

3. People hesitate to inform those in authority about problems because they feel this will make them appear incompetent.

4. Managers who are unable to encourage communication from others lack the comprehensive, detailed information which is essential for effective decisions.

5. The personal, informal, detailed information that is of greatest importance is most likely to come through face-to-face contact.

6. Managers must initiate such interactions. Show that you are friendly, interested and prepared to spend time listening. Authority and position should be de-emphasized. Create a warm, relaxed atmosphere.

7. Some managers think that they will lose status if they ask for advice or suggestions from those who report to them. This is not true.

8. Research has shown that work units with a group-centered manager have higher morale and productivity than do units operated by an aloof, authoritarian manager.

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TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR GOOD LISTENING

1. **Stop talking!**

   You cannot listen if you are talking.

2. **Put the talker at ease.**

   Help the person feel that he or she is free to talk. This is often called a permissive environment.

3. **Show the individual that you want to listen.**

   Look and act interested. Do not read your mail while the person talks. Listen to understand rather than to oppose.

4. **Remove distractions.**

   Don't doodle, tap, or shuffle papers. Will it be quieter if you shut the door?

5. **Empathize with the person.**

   Try to see the other's point of view.

6. **Be patient.**

   Allow plenty of time. Do not interrupt. Don't start for the door or walk away.

7. **Hold your temper.**

   An angry person gets the wrong meaning from words.

8. **Go easy on argument and criticism.**

   This puts the person on the defensive. He or she may "clam up" or get angry. Do not argue: Even if you win, you lose.

9. **Ask questions.**

   This encourages the speaker and shows you are listening. It helps to develop points further.

10. **Stop talking!**

    This is first and last, because all other commandments depend on it. You can't do a good listening job while you are talking.

Nature gave man two ears but only one tongue, which is a gentle hint that he should listen more than he talks.

Keith Davis, Human Behavior at Work, 4th ed., McGraw-Hill, 1972

Questions

Overhead Question - Direct at group to start discussion.
"What do you think of the plan?"

Direct Question - Specific answer from one individual.
- Makes reluctant speaker - speak out
- Slows down fast talker - by demanding an example.

Leading Question - Type of answer you would like to receive
Alerts your supporters to your views for support.

Factual Question - Obtain information
"Who, What, Where, Which, Why, How, When?"

Alternative Question - Yes or No - Followed by factual question.

Ambiguous Question - More than one answer and purposely so,
To provide a response or slow down a fast talker.
"Is it good policy to fire an employee?"
- Each answer is subject to argument - Good for lethargic group.

Rhetorical Question - No reply is expected and hopefully, none will be received - Ends discussion.
- "I'm sure you all agree..."

Redirected Question - Throw back to person who raised it.
"That's a good question, do you have any suggestions?"

AVOID:

- Yes or No
- Sarcasm
- Personal questions which will embarrass.

Questions practically force participation.

HANDLING QUESTIONS

- *Receive All Questions Cordially*

Don't view the questioner as an adversary but rather as someone seeking your help because you are the expert. Respond with phrases such as:

- "I'm glad you asked . . ."
- "That's a good question . . ."
- "Many people are concerned about that . . ."

- *Listen Carefully*

Listen for tone of voice, inflection and emphasis and especially content. Make sure you understand the question. Restate the question for the audience.

- *"Look Before You Leap"*

Avoid instantaneous answers that may sound pat or smug. Take a slight pause before you answer the question to get your thoughts in order.

- *Keep Your Answer Simple*

Use short, to-the-point answers, supported by an example. Avoid "Yes" or "No" because these stifle discussion. If someone wants more information, give them additional written supportive material after the presentation.

- *If You Don't Know the Answer, Say So*

Never bluff, guess or fake an answer. You can always say, "I don't know the answer to that question but I'll be glad to get it for you . . . ." Or throw the question back to the group for their collective thinking.

- *Never be Defensive*

Move from defensive to offensive, from negative to positive. Rephrase and restate questions that have "zingers" or loaded phrases. Try statements such as:

- "Obviously, we have a difference of opinion, but let's not waste time arguing. What's more important is . . ."
- "I can understand where you might have gotten that impression but I don't really agree. Let me point out that . . ."
- "Quite the contrary. Perhaps you're not aware of . . ."

QUESTION - EXERCISE

The following are inadequate responses to interview questions. Rephrase the initial question to provide the interviewee with another opportunity to respond effectively.

Question 1: Tell me about your experience as a counselor.

Answer: I have been a counselor for five years in Chicago.

Rephrased question: _____

Question 2: What are your career goals after college?

Answer: To get a job.

Rephrased question: _____

Question 3: Are you familiar with the company's retirement planning program?

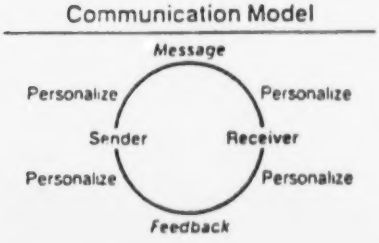
Answer: I'm not going anywhere.

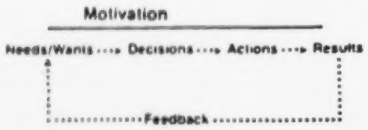
Rephrased question: _____

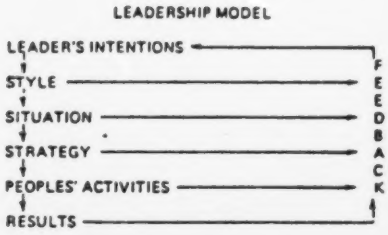
INTRODUCTION TO FEEDBACK

Feedback is that special person-to-person communication that provides insight into behavior at work. It is information given or gotten which helps you to be more effective as a leader and as a member of a group.

Feedback is part of the communication cycle. Two-way communication involves feedback from the receiver of the message, establishing that the message got through. The purpose of one or more cycles of feedback about a message is to ensure that understanding has been communicated, rather than just words.







Communication Model | Motivation Model | Leadership Model

Feedback is also part of the motivation cycle. Depending upon the feedback we get, we may be highly motivated to do something again, or we may feel that we don't want to have another similar experience.

Feedback plays an important role in the effectiveness of a leader--feedback both given to employees on results achieved and gotten from employees, peers, and supervisors on our own performance can significantly improve our effectiveness.

Good feedback depends on three things:

Dialogue: good listening and good talking between two people; exchanging concerns, ideas, and feelings.

Information: the facts and opinions that we talk about. Information is specific; it should be helpful and relevant to the topic.

Openness: a climate in which people are willing to open themselves up to give and receive feedback in an attitude of helpfulness. The climate in which our communication takes place has an important effect on two-way communication in an organization.

FEEDBACK INVENTORY QUESTIONNAIRE

Below are some questions on how you give and get feedback on the job. Think how frequently your feedback relates to these questions. Decide whether you think it is RARELY, SOMETIMES, OFTEN, or VERY OFTEN and circle the appropriate number.

	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
Questions on Giving Feedback:				
1. When giving feedback, do you plan what you are going to say?	1	2	3	4
2. Is the feedback you give clear and specific?	1	2	3	4
3. Do you provide feedback in moderation?	1	2	3	4
4. Do you anticipate the reaction you may get to the feedback you give?	1	2	3	4
5. Is giving feedback a regular part of your relationship with others?	1	2	3	4
6. Do you stick to the facts when giving feedback?	1	2	3	4
7. Do you give feedback on a timely oasis?	1	2	3	4
8. Do you ask to see if your feedback is helpful?	1	2	3	4
9. Do you review and assess the feedback you give?	1	2	3	4
Questions on Getting Feedback:				
10. When getting feedback, do you plan what you are going to ask?	1	2	3	4
11. Do you ask specific questions to get feedback?	1	2	3	4
12. Are you careful about how much feedback you ask for at one time?	1	2	3	4
13. Do you let the other person know in advance that you would like to get some feedback?	1	2	3	4
14. Is getting feedback a regular part of your relationship with others?	1	2	3	4
15. Do you control your emotions when asking for feedback?	1	2	3	4
16. Do you ask for feedback on a timely basis?	1	2	3	4
17. Is the feedback you get useful to you?	1	2	3	4
18. Do you review and assess the feedback you get?	1	2	3	4

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PRINCIPLES FOR GOOD FEEDBACK	Giving Feedback		Getting Feedback	
PLAN Plan what you are going to say or do. Think through how and when you will open the subject, how you will express yourself, and what your reasons are.	1		10	
BE SPECIFIC Be specific about the feedback you are giving, and guide the feedback you get in the same direction. Describe specific behavior; answer what, when, where, and how.	2		11	
PROVIDE FEEDBACK IN MODERATION Keep feedback moving in a steady stream; open up the most important issues, rather than all of them. Don't unload more than can be handled.	3		12	
CONSIDER THE CONSEQUENCES A positive reaction to your feedback obligates you to follow through in the future. When offering feedback, try to give the other person and yourself a way out in case a negative reaction develops.	4		13	
MAKE IT NATURAL Watch for opportunities to make feedback a natural and regular part of your relationships.	5		14	
STICK WITH THE FACTS Communicate facts and avoid trying to interpret the other person's motives. Don't let your feelings get in the way of the facts.	6		15	
BE RESPONSIVE Be timely. Respond quickly when the opportunity arises to give feedback. Always communicate directly with the person for whom your feedback is intended.	7		16	
CHECK FOR VALIDITY Check feedback to be sure it is valid, not just what you personally like or dislike, value or don't value. Ask the other person: "Is this accurate?"	8		17	
MONITOR FEEDBACK REGULARLY Check your feedback from time to time. Make a mental inventory of the feedback you give and receive over a period of time.	9		18	

DO'S AND DON'T'S FOR FEEDBACK

1. Focus on specific behaviors, NOT on personality.
2. Focus on observations; AVOID inferences.
3. Describe behavior and AVOID personal judgments.
4. Describe behavior in terms of "more or less", NOT as "either/or."
5. Make feedback specific; AVOID abstract or general comments.
6. Make feedback timely, AVOID infrequent or delayed feedback.
7. Share ideas and information, AVOID giving advice.
8. Explore alternatives; AVOID giving answers and solutions.
9. Emphasize the value of feedback; AVOID using feedback as a "release."
10. Focus on what is said, NOT why it is said.
11. Clarify the feedback; AVOID making premature conclusions.
12. Moderate the amount of feedback; AVOID "over-communicating."

ACTION PLAN FOR GIVING FEEDBACK

1. Let's assume that the last month or so has been a typical month for you. In that period, how many times have you given person-to-person feedback that is important to you in your job situation? Note a few of these incidents: _____

2. Think of one specific situation in which you expect to give feedback to someone else--think of a real person, and a job-related situation. Using the nine principles of feedback listed below, plan how you will give feedback in the situation.

   PLAN (when, where, how?) _____

   BE SPECIFIC _____

   USE MODERATION _____

   CONSIDER CONSEQUENCES _____

   MAKE IT EASY _____

   BE OBJECTIVE _____

   BE RESPONSIVE _____

   CHECK FOR VALIDITY _____

   MONITOR REGULARLY _____

ACTION PLANNING FOR GETTING FEEDBACK

1. Let's assume that the last month or so has been a typical month for you. In that period, how many times have you gotten person-to-person feedback that is important to you in your job situation? Note a few incidents: _____

_____

_____

_____

2. Think of one specific situation in which you need to get feedback from someone else--think of a real person, and a job-related situation. Using the nine principles of feedback listed below, plan how you will get feedback in this situation.

PLAN (when, where, how) _____

BE SPECIFIC _____

USE MODERATION _____

CONSIDER CONSEQUENCES _____

MAKE IT EASY _____

BE OBJECTIVE _____

CHECK FOR VALIDITY _____

MONITOR REGULARLY _____